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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER KPAL KWBG UNSC IS LE SY  
SUBJECT: UNSC MONTHLY MIDDLE EAST MEETING: SUPPORTIVE OF  
PEACE PROCESS, CRITICAL OF HAMAS AND ISRAELI  
SETTLEMENTS/BORDER CLOSURES

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During the monthly Security Council meeting on the Middle East, Robert Serry, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and the Secretary General's Personal Representative to the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, briefed the Council on the situation in Gaza and the West Bank. Serry emphasized the need to support Egypt's efforts at Palestinian reconciliation and the fragility of the cease-fire, and he highlighted the dire economic and social crisis in Gaza and Hamas' attacks and revenge killings. Serry said the West Bank remained calm, but he criticized Israel's expanding "illegal" settlements as detrimental to final status negotiations as well as attacks by Israeli settlers on Palestinians, particularly children. Regarding Lebanon, Serry said divisions between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas were not evident there, and despite daunting setbacks, reconstruction was set to begin on the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in Lebanon.

¶2. (SBU) In Council consultations following the briefing, support for Egypt's role as mediator between Palestinian factions, endorsement of the peace process, a reopening of border crossings to Gaza, and criticism of Israeli settlement expansion emerged as the primary themes from almost all delegations. Russian Perm Rep Churkin said the international community must give Egypt its full support, and in light of the recent hostilities in Gaza, the upcoming Moscow Conference on the Middle East has taken on special importance. Churkin said his government would like broaden the Moscow agenda. Most delegations welcomed the appointment of George Mitchell as Special Envoy for Middle East Peace as well as the creation of a UN Board of Inquiry into the bombing of UN entities in Gaza. End Summary.

Robert Serry Briefs the Council

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¶3. (SBU) During the monthly Security Council meeting on the Middle East on February 18, Robert Serry, the Secretary General's Personal Representative to the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, assessed the situation in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as inter-Palestinian negotiations and the status of the peace talks. Serry said that one month since the unilateral cease-fires were declared, a proper cease-fire still had not been implemented, making the return to hostilities a real possibility. He said the cease-fire would only be durable when an exchange of prisoners took place, including the return of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, smuggling ceased, and Palestinian unity became a reality. However, Serry was pessimistic that the Palestinians could achieve a semblance of unity, particularly in the absence of a proper ceasefire. Serry said "irresponsible" and "unacceptable" attacks have continued by both sides, including the firing of rockets by Palestinian militants and Israeli airstrikes into Gaza. Serry also condemned Hamas' carrying out of "revenge killings" against what they considered collaborators, and he noted Hamas' theft of humanitarian goods from UNRWA

facilities, which led to UNRWA's temporary ceasing of operations.

14. (SBU) With regard to reconstruction, Serry said the people of Gaza were experiencing severe political, economic and social crises. Serry highlighted that in the past few weeks, a daily average of 146 truckloads entered Gaza--four times what entered Gaza in December 2008, but only a third of what entered in May 2007. Consequently, Gaza's 1.4 million residents remain "desperately" short of vital supplies. Serry said Israel's ban on fuel imports into Gaza has meant that only 52 percent of industrial fuel requirements and 23 percent of cooking gas requirements were being met. Moreover, he said the shortages were leading to inflation, which combined with banks' lack of cash on hand, meant that Gaza's residents were finding it difficult to purchase basic goods. Serry said he appreciated Israel's promises to open border crossings but lamented that so far this had not happened. He welcomed the creation of the UN's Board of Inquiry into the destruction of UN facilities in Gaza.

15. (SBU) On the West Bank, Serry judged that it remained calm, but he criticized Israel's expanding "illegal" settlements as detrimental to final status negotiations. He said in 2008 there was a 68 percent increase in settlements over the previous year and noted that international calls to cease settlement expansion have not worked. He cited Israeli settler attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank, including against children.

16. (SBU) On Lebanon, Serry praised the beginning work of reconstructing the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, which he said

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was taking place under difficult circumstances such as unexploded ordinance. He said the Doha Agreement, agreed to in May 2008 among the rival Lebanese factions, was moving according to schedule, but he noted that signs of instability are still present.

Strong Backing for Egypt and Palestinian Unity

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17. (SBU) In consultations following Serry's briefing, Council members echoed Serry's statements that Egypt could not succeed in mediating between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas without backing from the international community. Ambassador Rice said the U.S. strongly supports Egyptian President Mubarak's efforts at Palestinian reconciliation. Russian Perm Rep Vitaly Churkin said countries "must redouble efforts" in the Middle East and give Egypt their full support. He said reconstruction in Gaza is impossible without Palestinian unity and without engaging Hamas, but he cautioned that Hamas' idea of structure separate from a unity structure was "highly dangerous." Austrian Perm Rep Mayr-Harting said, "We are disturbed by reports by NGOs that Hamas is killing alleged collaborators." Turkish Perm Rep Ilkin said that Hamas "must realize disunity is hurting its people." He commended Egypt's efforts and said Turkey wants to help Egypt. Ilkin said he was "afraid that Syrian and Israeli talks had been suspended," but Turkey will participate in the Sharm Al-Sheikh on March 2, nonetheless. Croatian Perm Rep Jurica welcomed Egypt's work and "deplored" Hamas' rocket fire, which threatened an already fragile ceasefire. Japanese Perm Rep Takasu said every effort must be made to ensure success of Sharm Al Sheikh, and France's Perm Rep Ripert said his country is co-sponsoring the Conference. France and Croatia called for the release of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit

Moving Forward with Peace Negotiations

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18. (SBU) One of the strongest endorsements for continuing peace negotiations came from the Russian Perm Rep, who

offered more detail on how his government was approaching the upcoming Moscow Conference than had previously been seen. Churkin said the Moscow Conference had taken on special significance now in light of the crisis in Gaza, and he said his government would like to make the conference agenda broader and not limit topics. He added that he hoped a broad discussion could produce a "universal document" where both sides could voice their concerns. Libyan Charge Dabbashi, who gave the most derogatory statement, said Libya looked forward to the Moscow Conference. Ripert said there was no alternative to relaunching the peace process, which would include a halting of Israeli settlement activity. Burkinabe Perm Rep Kafando said he "hoped the forthcoming Moscow Conference will bear fruit." Ugandan Perm Rep Rugunda said he was "happy" the U.S. had appointed George Mitchell as Special Envoy because he has a "good record." During his statement, he said he was optimistic that "most powerful countries"--a phrase he repeated often--were now focusing on the Middle East. Ambassador Rice said "vigorous, resolute American engagement can help support the parties," and that the Quartet remains the most effective instrument to bring lasting peace to the Middle East.

Opening of Border Crossings a Common Theme

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¶9. (SBU) Security Council members voiced concern that Israel's border closures with Gaza were contributing to the economic and social distress among the population. However, most delegations also said that smuggling of weapons by Hamas into Gaza was undermining the ceasefire. The Austrian Perm Rep stated the humanitarian situation in Gaza was of "grave concern. He said he understood Israel's security concerns regarding smuggling, but he judged that one of the reasons the smuggling tunnels into Gaza came into existence was because of Israel's tight border controls. The Chinese, Croatian, French, Japanese, and UK Ambassadors urged Israel to reopen borders immediately to allow in goods. The Burkinabe, Costa Rican, Mexican, and Turkish Perm Reps specifically noted the urgent need for building materials, such as cement, to enter Gaza. Turkish Perm Rep Ilkin said talk of reconstruction was pointless without construction materials. Russian Perm Rep Churkin said ending the smuggling is critical, noting that "it is better to deal with smuggling in the Security Council as we did with Somali pirates." The UK's Political Counselor said he understands Israel's security concerns but said the UK might provide

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naval support for monitoring of the Gazan littoral.

Israel Criticized for Settlements

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¶10. (SBU) Most delegations echoed Serry's assessment that expanding Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Golan were undermining final status negotiations. Austrian Perm Rep Mayr Harting emphasized that Austria and other European countries were concerned about new settlement construction, which he called illegal under international law, and called for a freeze on new construction and natural growth of existing settlements. He said Israel's policy compromises the viability of a negotiated settlement. China said settlement expansion violates international law, and the Libyan Charge quoted George Mitchell from 2001 that "settlements are the reason for the conflict." Costan Rican Perm Rep Urbina said settlements in the West Bank and the Golan are "not helpful."

Endorsement of UN Board of Inquiry

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¶11. (SBU) Most Council members voiced support for the Secretary General's creation of a UN Board of Inquiry to investigate the shelling of the UNRWA compound and other UN entities. The UK said it "fully supports" the Secretary

General's investigation into the shelling of UN facilities, and the Chinese and Croatian said they awaited the results of the investigation. Burkina Faso urged all parties to cooperate with the Board of Inquiry.

Rice